

This gold-plated half is far from precious

By Roger Boye

Here are answers to more questions from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—My sister bought a 1979 half dollar [nonsilver coin] plated with gold. Quite naturally, she's wondering how much the precious metal might be worth.—A.K., Dixon.

A—It's impossible to say for sure without knowing the purity of the gold and the thickness of the plating. Most likely, however, the four-bits piece is covered with a minute quantity of gold worth less than \$1.

Gold is a versatile metal; one ounce can be stretched thin enough to cover nearly 300 square feet or formed into a wire several miles long. The gold plating added to many modern-day coins often is less than seven-millionths of an inch thick.

Q—I own a \$1 bill with a blue unicorn to the left of Washington's portrait. Is it a rarity or a phony?—T.L., Friendship, Wis.

A—Some would-be artist used your bill for scratch paper. It's worth \$1, nothing more.

Q—Please help settle a dispute. A friend insists that almost all coins throughout history have been round, but I say they have existed in many shapes and even with holes in the middle. Who's right?—L.O., Chicago.

A—You win. Several countries have issued square coins over the years, including present-day India and the Philippines. Canada is just one nation minting a multisided coin, and Chinese "cash pieces" [round coins with square holes in the middle] circulated in the Orient during bygone eras.

Q—Much to my amazement, the grocery store clerk handed me a \$1 bill in change with a mirror-image serial number: B2226222C. Do people collect such oddities?—J.H., Gary, Ind.

A—Yes, and that fact prompts some dealers to buy and sell bills with fancy numbers. If you want to unload your specimen, call several coin shops in your area and check the "wanted—paper money" classified advertisements in Coin World or other hobby publications.

Incidentally, currency expert Chuck O'Donnell estimates that bills like yours [often dubbed "radar notes" or "palindromes"] might sell for \$25.

Q—I read with great interest your column about 1982-dated dimes that are valuable because they lack mint marks. I've got two 1982 pennies without marks. Do I own a fortune?—J.M., Franklin Park.

Hardly. Starting in 1980, the Philadelphia Mint added a "P" mint mark to the coins it makes, except for Lincoln cents. [Before then, almost all Philly coins carried no mark.] Your pennies are just normal Philadelphia-produced specimens, two of more than 9 billion in circulation.